

A sermon given on Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> September 2019 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

WHO IS GOD? SERMON SERIES

Sermon 1: Creator and Father

Readings: Isaiah 40:12-18; Psalm 148; Matthew 6:25-34

**The God we worship**

Since the earliest days of the human race, it seems that we have felt the need to worship something. Archaeological remains of early human settlements show evidence of religious rituals.

It is part of the nature of human beings to want to make sense of our lives and the world we live in. Although we may like to feel that we are in control of our lives, we are often forced to recognise that we are at the mercy of forces in the world much greater than us, which we often do not understand. Could it be that the world was created for a purpose, and that our lives can find their meaning by connecting with the Creator?

Atheists like Richard Dawkins like to explain away belief in the divine as a temporary stage in the evolution of human beings which is no longer necessary because science can answer all our questions and solve all our problems. An alternative view is that there is more to the universe than the material and physical, and that human beings are hard-wired to respond to spiritual realities. As Augustine of Hippo wrote in a prayer to God, "you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you".

So if there is a God, what is he or she like? And how could we find out?

A mother saw her little girl drawing a picture and asked, "What are you drawing?" "I'm drawing God", said the little girl. "Well, that's interesting, darling", said the mother. "Nobody knows what God looks like." "They will when I've finished my picture", said the girl, triumphantly.

I wonder how you picture God, if indeed you do have a visual image in your mind. Or maybe your sense of God is more about a feeling or an experience, or perhaps a more intellectual set of propositions. In the next couple of weeks we are going to explore what Christians believe about God, and why we believe it.

But before we go on, I'd like to invite you to spend a moment asking yourself two questions:

- 1) What concept of God did you have as a child?
- 2) How has your concept of God changed since then, and why?

**What can we know about God?**

The people of Israel in the Bible were very conscious that their religion was very distinctive. Other nations had many gods, each with his or her own area of responsibility, e.g. fertility, rain and harvest, the sun, war or peace, wisdom or love. The Jews, however, believed in only one God, and they were forbidden to worship any others. When the apostle Paul started his mission of taking the gospel about Jesus around the Mediterranean, his strategy was to go first to synagogues where he could speak not only to Jews but to non-Jews who were already interested in Judaism and its one God.

But soon enough Paul found himself faced with people who had no such assumptions. On his first missionary journey, after Paul had healed a crippled man in the street at Lystra (in modern-day Turkey), he and Barnabas faced a crowd who were so impressed by the miracle that they thought Paul and Barnabas were the gods Hermes and Zeus. Hearing that the priest of Zeus was about to offer sacrifice to them, the apostles

... tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, 'Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good - giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.' (Acts 13:14-17<sup>1</sup>)

Four chapters later, in Athens, we find Paul adopting a more considered approach. Some of the Greek philosophers invite Paul to the Areopagus, an outdoor centre for philosophical debate. Paul begins his speech by commenting on how religious the people of Athens are – the city is full of temples and shrines to any number of gods. But he continues:

The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him— though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.” (Acts 17:24-28)

Paul's quotations from earlier Greek philosophers acknowledges that in their culture there had been those who had already grasped important truths about God. Later, Christian theologians recognised a kindred spirit in the writings of Plato and other ancient Greek philosophers.

Paul's thesis is that the creation itself gives plenty of evidence for God and his providence, as he also writes in his letter to the church in Rome:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. (Romans 1:19-20 NRSV)

### **Eternity in their hearts**

Kampala, Uganda, where George and I used to live, was in the nineteenth century the capital of the kingdom of Buganda. When the CMS missionaries arrived in 1877, they found that the indigenous religion of the Baganda tribe included belief in a supreme Creator and Ruler of the universe named Katonda, who was remote and unknowable<sup>2</sup>. Very sensibly, they used this word for God in their translation of the Bible into the language of the Baganda. Their message, of course, was that the Creator God whom the Baganda knew as Katonda had revealed himself to humanity by sending his Son into the world.

Don Richardson, a former missionary in Papua New Guinea, writes in his book *Eternity in their Hearts*<sup>3</sup> of how Christian missionaries to far-flung parts of the world have again and again encountered this same belief in a supreme Creator God. 2,600 years before Christ, and 2,000 years before Confucius or the arrival of Buddhism, the Chinese believed in a creator called Shang Ti, the Lord of Heaven, and the Koreans had a similar faith in Hananim, “the Great One”. The Quechua people in Peru, known to us as the Incas, believed in the omnipotent Creator, Viracocha; the Gedeo people of Ethiopia called him Magano.

When a missionary reached the Mbaka people in the Central African Republic, they told him, “Koro, the Creator, sent word to our forefathers long ages ago that He has already sent His Son into the world to accomplish something wonderful for all mankind.” The people already believed that one day messengers would come to tell them about the Creator's Son, and so when the missionary arrived, huge numbers of them became Christians.

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<sup>1</sup> All bible quotations used in this sermon are from the NRSV translation

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.buganda.com/eddiini.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Don Richardson, *Eternity in their hearts* (Regal Books, Bloomington Minnesota 1981, and Bethany House Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2014) chapter 1

I haven't time now to tell you more about these and other peoples who seem to have known about the God we believe in long before Christians brought the news about how God had revealed himself in his Son Jesus Christ. I strongly recommend you read Don Richardson's book for yourselves.

### **More about the Creator**

So what does the Creation tell us about God?

Here's what one particle physicist wrote:

"I have studied the very smallest building blocks of the universe; the particles of which atoms are made... What is the universe like when we look at it from that vantage point? To a scientist, it's beautiful! The scientific laws governing the sub-atomic world are stunning in their simplicity. The particles and forces operate in their strange and amazing ways, and when billions of billions of billions of them are put together, we have the beautiful large-scale world in which we live...The nuclear particles that I have studied are just the building blocks that God used in making everything that exists. The beauty of our world reflects the excellence of Him who created those infinitesimal particles, and who then formed them into everything we see around us."<sup>4</sup>

The doctrine of Creation permeates the witness of the Bible. We all know that Genesis begins with the words, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). There are also many poetic passages in the Bible that tell how the creation reveals God's infinite power and wisdom. Here are a few quotes<sup>5</sup>:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. (Psalm 19:1)

O LORD, how manifold are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all;  
the earth is full of your creatures. (Psalm 104:24)

The LORD by wisdom founded the earth;  
by understanding he established the heavens. (Proverbs 3:19)

To whom then will you compare me,  
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

Lift up your eyes on high and see:

Who created these?

He who brings out their host and numbers them,  
calling them all by name;

because he is great in strength,  
mighty in power,

not one is missing. (Isaiah 40:25-26)

The awesome beauty and complexity of the universe, as well as inexorable forces of nature, which we glimpse in tornadoes and the power of an atomic explosion, speak eloquently of the infinite power of God. But power without wisdom or compassion would be tyrannical. The laws of nature certainly speak of the wisdom of God. As the human race destroys more and more of our world through negligence or greed, we are beginning to recognise how the natural order is finely balanced, and every organism has its part to play, down to the tiniest microbe.

### **The Compassionate Creator**

But what of the compassion of God? Is he a remote Creator who treats his creation as a mere plaything, or does he care about the universe and its creatures? The question of suffering in the world is a complex one, which we do not have time to properly address today. The only comment I can make now is to draw a parallel between the interplay of cause and effect in human behaviour and the operation of cause and effect in the natural world. If humans have free will, then it is

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<sup>4</sup> Randall J. Fisk, "Beyond Einstein" in *Scientists who believe*, Amersham 1986: Scripture Press Foundation, p 85

<sup>5</sup> See also Psalm 95:3-7, Psalm 148

inevitable that sometimes we will exercise this selfishly, which must as a consequence cause others to suffer. In the same way, the workings of nature inevitably mean that some things have to get broken in order for new things to emerge; the lion has to kill the antelope in order to feed herself and her cubs; a woman has to endure the pain of childbirth so that a new human being can be born into the world.

Psalm 145 assures us that God cares about his creatures:

The LORD is good to all,  
and his compassion is over all that he has made. (Ps 145:9)

Jesus goes further in talking about God as a loving Father who cares for human beings in particular:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matthew 10:29-31)

And in Matthew chapter 6, Jesus speaks of God as our heavenly Father who knows our needs before we ask him<sup>6</sup>, and will provide for us if we will only trust him and seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness<sup>7</sup>.

And so in the famous prayer he taught his disciples, Jesus invites us to come to our Father in humility and trust, hallowing his name, praying for his will to be done, trusting him for our daily bread, seeking forgiveness for our sins and protection from evil and temptation.

### **The love of the Creator**

At its heart, Christianity holds together two fundamental truths: that the universe was created by an infinitely powerful and infinitely wise Creator; and that this Almighty Creator loves everything he created, most especially human beings who were made in his image<sup>8</sup>.

Let me finish with words from Randall J. Fisk, the particle physicist I quoted earlier:

“Albert Einstein was overwhelmed with the simple beauty he found in the equations governing relativity – a symmetry and order that he called “elegance”. It seemed to him that there had to be a Creator, and an awe-inspiring one at that. Sadly, however, Einstein couldn’t believe a God so big and so majestic as to have created the universe would really care about him personally. In that respect, I’ve gone beyond Einstein. I’ve discovered that the true and living God is concerned about me – and that He knows each of us by name.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 6:8

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 6:33

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 1:26-27

<sup>9</sup> Randall J. Fisk, “Beyond Einstein” in *Scientists who believe*, Amersham 1986: Scripture Press Foundation, p86